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ABSTRACT

A systematic review of 3 years of popular magazines sought to determine if articles are published that constitute rhetorical criticism of the mass media. The survey revealed that rhetorical criticism was published in a wide variety of popular magazines, but was not labelled as such. Television (TV) was the focus of most of these critical analyses, specifically the role of TV in our lives, role stereotyping and commercials, TV politics, and TV religion. No methodological techniques were mentioned by name or by implication in any of the articles. Methodology in the articles was not mentioned by name or implication, but seemed to resemble most closely experiential criticism--well written insights growing out of a knowledge of how messages function and based to a degree on personal experience. In a course at California State University, Sacramento, students were expected to analyze magazine markets, write query letters, and write essays of rhetorical criticism for popular markets. Teaching critical writing for popular audiences requires some changes in the academic definition of what is acceptable. Popular articles tend to neglect references, omit methodological detail, and adopt a colloquial style; however, none of this means that quality criticism need be abandoned. Writing for a popular market offers an avenue to disseminate critical analysis that has to date been largely neglected and would be worthwhile to both the critic and the general public. (SRT)

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TAKING CRITICISM TO THE STREETS IN PRINT:

TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE CRITICISM FOR POPULAR CONSUMPTION

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TAKING CRITICISM TO THE STREETS IN PRINT:

TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE CRITICISM FOR POPULAR CONSUMPTION

Rhetorical criticism in one form or another has been a basic staple of the communications discipline since the days when departments were called Speech and Rhetoric and industrious scholars diligently searched speeches for evidence of ethos, pathos, and logos. Today scholarly eyes grow bleary from recurring episodes of Hill Street Blues instead of yellowed pages culled from William Jennings Bryan, and methodological dispute rages over the best ways to analyze messages. Very often, however, the advocates of Fantasy Theme Analysis versus the Neo-Aristotelian approach seem to be talking primarily to each other. That a larger audience among the reading public could benefit from the insights offered through rhetorical criticism is addressed only intermittently.

As early as 1966 Anthony Hillbruner suggested that rhetorical critics could benefit from "reading other kinds of critical writing" not only in scholarly publications but also in "more popular journals such as Atlantic, Harper's Magazine, The Reporter, The National Review, or Modern Age" (168). Karlyn Campbell went a step further, writing in 1974 of "ephemeral and enduring criticism," urging scholars not only to read the popular critics but as well to apply the principles taught in rhetorical criticism courses

to a popular marketplace:

> Professional journals should not be the primary vehicles nor professional colleagues the primary audience for such efforts. The social criticism of ephemeral, contemporary events belongs in the mass media, where much of it now appears, and the audience it needs to reach is the general public. The social function of criticism is to raise issues and encourage public discussion. (10)

Campbell did not elaborate on her phrase "where much of it now appears," but a casual review of popular publications indicates that what seems to be rhetorical criticism, though it is not so labelled, is published regularly in newspapers and magazines under such headings as "Commentary," "Media," "Political Analysis," "Review," or "Opinion" and is written by journalists, sociologists, freelance magazine writers, and columnists. Such articles seem to be practical applications where the skills taught through rhetorical criticism are needed.

If such articles are being published, there is every reason to believe communication scholars should be writing them. As a discipline we teach techniques for delving past the external veneer of a message into its subtle implications and persuasive style; we have mastered a plethora of techniques to understand what's happening in the arena of mass messages.

In addition, the very act of teaching student critics to write for popular magazines, whether they ever publish or not, is functional. First, it grounds rhetorical criticism for them in a demonstrable, real life function; it gives the act of analysis a clear, discernable purpose and by so doing, clarifies the process. Students can see that they are explaining

rhetorical messages to an audience who lack the background and insights the students possess, and thus student efforts become meaningful in light of a potential reading audience. The analytical appeal that draws more advanced scholars--refining methodological knowledge or uncovering insights in particular messages that reflect on the more general level of theory about all messages--often does not have as much meaning to students. Simply knowing that rhetorical criticism has an application to the popular market gives students a framework for their critical efforts.

Second, writing for a popular market demands of students that they hone their writing skills to a fine level and develop a sense of style and a feeling for language.

However, teaching students to write for popular publications is not so simple as merely enjoining them to do so. The first step in "taking criticism to the streets" via popular magazine publication is to be sure anybody out there in the streets wants it. Preparatory to teaching such a class I undertook a systematic review of three years of popular magazines to see if they do indeed publish rhetorical criticism.[1] Magazines were selected as the target medium because they commonly accept freelance articles from authors who are not on the staff and thus they seemed likely recipients of scholarly works written in a popular style. The review served two purposes: first, to determine if rhetorical criticism actually has a practical application for the reading public and second, to suggest a list of potential markets for students in the class.

Identifying rhetorical criticism in popular magazines is more difficult than initial consideration might suggest. "Rhetorical criticism" as an access term for magazine indexes is a key to absolutely nothing. In

order to find articles that could potentially be rhetorical criticism, multiple access labels had to be relied on, drawn from a list of intuitive labels and from the "see also" list at the end of each section these generated. Ultimately the access labels ran a gamut of rhetorical potpourri: activism, Americana, book reviews, books, broadcast news, cable TV, commentary, communication, criticism, drama, electronic religion, essays, family, film, journalism, mass media, men, motion pictures, movies, music, mythology, pornography, politics, politicians, press, propaganda, protest, radio, religion, reviews, rock and roll, self-help books, social commentary, sex in mass media, speech, television, United States--politics and government, viewpoint, violence, women.

These were used to search the Magazine Index, the Reader's Guide to Popular Periodicals and the New Periodicals Index from January 1979 through May 1983. All articles elicited by these codes were examined to determine if they were in fact rhetorical criticism. The general guideline used was to search for articles that focused on the message component of the subject written about and attempted to analyze and/or evaluate it. Straight expository articles and reviews of individual works were eliminated when they failed to comment on the subject as a message.

Articles eliminated were very clearly and obviously not in the critical category; few fine line distinctions were called for. Typical examples are "Blacks on the Soaps" (Johnson) in Ebony which turned out to be an article on programming policies leading to more employment for blacks on soap operas; "What is Television Doing to Real People?" (Swerdlow), a Today's Education review of research on the impact of television; "TV and Your Preschooler" (Katz) in Parents, which detailed parental responsibility

to oversee a young child's viewing habits; and Time's "In Hollywood, the Year of the Hunk," a discussion of new male TV stars.

Remaining articles formed an initial core of what could be labelled popularly published rhetorical criticism. This core has been supplemented with additional selections since that time. (A sample listing is attached.) Analysis of these pieces provided some basic guidelines for teaching the class and answered questions about the area:

1. Is rhetorical criticism published in popular magazines?

Something akin to rhetorical criticism was indeed published in these popular magazines, but it was not labelled in the articles in any way that would identify it as critical analysis. The term rhetorical criticism has no viability at all in popular magazines. Most frequently, rhetorical criticism was labelled by the subject matter being analyzed.

2. Where is it published?

A wide variety of different magazines published articles which could be called rhetorical criticism. Some of these were predictable because of their focus on media--American Film, Film Comment, Film Quarterly, and TV Guide--but others had no inherent reason to focus on messages. The largest publisher by an overwhelming margin was TV Guide. While some eliminated Guide articles were simply celebrity interviews or behind-the-scenes tidbits, many pieces examined television-sent messages in articles written by well-informed authors who expressed their ideas in a lively style. The wide range of publications suggests a potential demand for such pieces if they match the general interest area and style of the publishing journal and its readers.

3. What kind of subjects are examined?

The mass media, especially television, were the focus of most of these critical analyses. The twenty articles in TV Guide all dealt with television. Of the forty-four remaining articles, twenty-two were about messages on television or television itself as a message; ten, were on film; nine, books; and three, a combination of media.

Of those articles about television, specific topics included informal discussions of what could be termed the creation of social reality (sort of "how media slip their biases into our world view"); the role of TV in our lives; role stereotyping and commercials; and to a lesser degree TV and politics and TV and religion. Articles about films expressed concern about social reality and offered explanations for the place of film in our lives. The analyses of books were slightly more difficult to categorize. They ranged from discussions of censorship to implications and possible dangers of self-help books to questions about the reality portrayed in the books examined.

Of some interest are the message categories not found in the popular magazines. Most notable among these was the old stand-by, the public speech. This may be accounted for by the fact that this examination of possible markets was restricted to magazines. Certainly in the days following any significant public address, newspaper columns are filled with analyses and interpretations. Had newspaper indexes been examined, the topic areas might have reflected public addresses, especially political ones, more readily.

Also missing were analyses of political campaigns and social issue

campaigns (such as Greenpeace.)

4. What methodologies are used for analysis?

No methodological techniques were mentioned by name or by implication in any of the articles. Certainly no jargon such as disposition or pentad or reality link ever touched the slick pages. If the authors relied on the standard analysis formats to generate their insights, they cloaked them carefully. (And, indeed, it is quite possible that they did. See discussion under Question 5 on "companion" articles.)

Perhaps the authors come closest to using what Brock and Scott call Experiential Criticism, well-written insights growing out of a knowledge of how messages function and based to a degree on personal experience. Brock and Scott assert that the "primary purposes of rhetorical criticism are to describe, to interpret and to evaluate" (19). They acknowledged the interdependency of the three phases, writing: "These purposes tend to merge into one another. One purpose prepares for the next; the one that follows reflects back on the one that has been explicated" (19). Writing for popular markets carries the interdependency to the extreme. These articles offered minimal direct interpretation, thus skimping on what is the heart of rhetorical criticism. A common organizational pattern was to devote as much as three-fourths of the article's space to what was primarily description, subtly blending interpretation as the article progressed, then leaping quickly in the last couple of paragraphs to an evaluation, generated logically by the development of the article.

For example, a TV Guide piece by John Leonard, "Three's Company--What's It Really Trying to Tell Us?" begins with a humorous personal anecdote, then spends the better part of two pages (out of two-and-a-half

remaining) describing the show in terms of some of its themes. Leonard offers an implied interpretation of those themes couched in humorous phrases:

> Why does Jack prefer Terri and/or Cindy/Chrissy to Janet? Because Janet is not a dippy blond. (37). . .
>
> Meanwhile Rebecca and Rowena are standing there with their breasts hanging out. This is the only way to describe what they are doing, and it must be the director's personal fault, because the grown women I chance to meet don't just stand there with their breasts hanging out, with their elbows cocked at odd angles, like broken wings, as if they were parakeets with the hiccups. (38)

Only in his final paragraphs does Leonard switch to overt analysis. There he says:

> A critic should always be able to dream up four or five meanings for any excrescence of popular culture. . . . Let us Deep-Think. Remember the coed joke? (40)

After a short paragraph of ruminations he concludes:

> This is Denial. If we Deep-Think about denial, we understand that real sex, like politics and children and violence and pets is left out of "Three's" on purpose! The sitcom is in business to deny the facts of life; it consoles because it tells us, over and over again, that nothing happens and never will. (40)

Not all journals have the flippant style found in TV Guide, of course, but most articles examined did follow this format of blending analytical comments with description and reserving outright evaluative commentary for

a very short final segment of the article. Glamour's "Viewpoint" of February 1982, for instance, featured 1000 words about the super-woman stereotype in TV commercials and how it compared to the old ring-around-the-collar ads. The bulk of the essay was examples; only the last 140 words finally addressed the issue, beginning, "Both stereotypes are ridiculous, of course" . . . (Kellogg 64).

More thoughtful articles (and longer ones) offer more factual commentary (such as the number of hours watching TV, the number of records sold, the number of readers of a book), and often combine like subjects into what is akin to a genre analysis. A typical illustration of this approach is "The Standardized Childhood" by Christopher Johnson in Today's Education; it focused on the potential of television to create a social reality, analyzing certain shows in order to bring to the reader's consciousness what that television reality looked like:

> This homogenizing and standardizing tendency is evident in the rigid plots that dominate television's situation comedies and dramatic shows. For instance, examine The Incredible Hulk. For the first 20 minutes of every episode, David Banner finds himself in a new city and involved with a new set of people. But absolutely nothing happens until five minutes before the second commercial, when David turns into the Hulk. For a few minutes, children watch transfixed as the Hulk commits mayhem in the name of truth and justice. This is followed by another slow spell, until once again David turns into the Hulk. Every week it's the same: two appearances by the Hulk embedded in what can only be described as filler.

> If the plots on television shows are assembly lines, the characters in them are interchangeable parts, a collection of caricatures and stereotypes who are undifferentiated from the mass in any but the most superficial ways. (53) . . .
>
> One cannot overestimate the effect that this standardization, commercialization, and trivialization have on childhood and adolescence. . . . (53-54)

The article was filled with statistics on child viewing, authority comments on the effect of television viewing on self-concept, and additional examples of television programming which supported the author's thesis. In some ways the piece was a blend of a research report about the effects of television on children and a critical analysis of particular shows the child may choose to view and the potential impact of these shows given those research findings.

5. What applications can be made to the typical Communication Studies curriculum?

Students taking the course offered at California State University, Sacramento were required to have had a class in critical analysis of messages as a prerequisite, and we encouraged but did not require some Journalism courses. The class was divided into units on magazine writing style, magazine market analysis techniques, query letter writing, contrast between academic and popular writing styles (especially as applied to rhetorical criticism), and analysis of popularly published critical articles. Students were expected to analyze markets, write query letters, and write popular rhetorical-critical articles aimed for particular markets.

Two "companion" pieces were particularly helpful in demonstrating the differences between writing criticism for academic journals and writing for popular ones. One set involved writing by Robert Schrag of North Carolina State University, one of three authors who applied the phrase "humane collectivity" to a particular genre of television shows after doing a substantial Fantasy Theme Analysis. No hint of that methodology appeared in his article "Television Comedy: Counselors and Clowns," written for the magazine USA Today, though the material drew upon concepts from the original piece. A second set is my own Quarterly Journal of Speech article on my dissertation findings and a popularized summary of the same material in Human Behavior magazine. The advantage of examining these two sets is that much the same material is presented in both cases in very different forms.

Teaching critical writing for popular audiences necessitates some changes in the definition of acceptable rhetorical criticism. Three differences in terms of academic and popular standards are particularly plaguing. First, professors must abandon their traditional definition of acceptable academic writing. Popular articles tend not to provide detailed proof to back up assertions and generalizations the authors make. After years of forcing documentation upon students, it's disorienting to take it away. One possible resolution of this stress is to require students to document their assertions in a separate paper, much like a list of references is attached to an academic paper. Magazines commonly require references for data in any case and the more thorough publications verify all data. Asking students for demonstrable proof that their witty summaries are valid is not too far from this norm.

The second difference is the absence of methodological detail. If

this seems important to an instructor, a preliminary paper could be required, followed by a popularized version of the material so that students are encouraged to follow appropriate methodological techniques while still assuming a format suitable for publication.

Finally, the writing style itself is quite different. Writing for a popular market demands that the standards of the target market be adopted as the writing style. Hillbruner pointed out bluntly the contrast between some academic writing and its popular counterparts:

> If there is one detriment to effective public address criticism, if there is one important reason why it is not cherished more or, perhaps, even read, it is that much of it is dry, pedantic, undisciplined, undistinguished. The academic style prevails. And while academicians may not be loath to wade through a study in order to get whatever discernments are present in the critique, most lay readers hesitate to do so. The latter prefer sparkling, insightful assessments, even controversial ones, rather than phlegmatic, laconic ones. (168)

Typically, criticism in magazines conforms to journalistic standards. A variety of texts on magazine article writing is available from such publishers as Writer's Digest Books which explain these standards and how to analyze particular publications for the unique requirements of their journal. Students and faculty with no background in magazine writing could learn the techniques quickly from such sources. (See for example Connie Emerson's book Write on Target or Duane Newcomb's A Complete Guide to Marketing Magazine Articles.)

None of these changes means that quality criticism need be abandoned.

Indeed, articles by communication scholars in the popular market can add quality to that market. As well, such articles can verify that the techniques we teach in Communication Studies departments and apply for our own research can provide useful insights into messages and media for the general public. This offers an avenue to disseminate critical analysis that has to date been largely neglected and that would be worthwhile both to the critic and to the general public.

NOTES

[1]I was assisted in this task by two Master's degree candidates in Communication Studies at California State University, Sacramento, Patricia Harris and Joan Merriam, both of whom had taken our series of courses in rhetorical criticism.

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